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Preserving Food

• THE COLONIAL WAY •

By Nancy Mann Jackson

With the local food movement growing in popularity and food safety attracting headlines, more Americans have become interested in growing their own food. And not just a few patio containers of tomatoes. City-dwellers and rural Americans alike are planting flowerbeds and entire gardens full of vegetables, fruits and berries, or at least shopping for fresh produce at farmers' markets.

But once the bounty is harvested, growers must find a way to deal with the heaps of cucumbers, tomatoes, squash and okra that pile up on their kitchen counters every few days during the summer. While eating freshly harvested food is part of the fun, safely preserving the fruits and vegetables makes it possible to eat locally and healthfully all year long. Plus, environmental concerns have made the trend toward eating local food more important to many people. Preserving food at home isn't too difficult but it does require a learning curve—and learning to can, pickle, blanch and freeze can make one feel very Colonial.

"There's definitely an interest in gardening and preserving food again, and the economy is a lot of the reason," says Nancy Carter Crump, author of *Hearthside Cooking: Early American Southern Cuisine Updated for Today's Hearth and Cookstove* (UNC Press, 2008). "In these troubled times, people are interested in looking back at the past, and preserving food is definitely a part of that."

In early America, preserving food for the winter wasn't optional; it was the only way a family was guaranteed to continue eating. And food preservation was a constant, daily task. "I think people would be surprised at the constant activity and thought that went into [food preservation]," Crump says. "They were always working to make sure there would be enough food available for the family and for slaves, if they had them."

But like today's cooks who might relish the sense of accomplishment Crump says she feels upon finishing a batch of peach preserves, Colonial women could enjoy the satisfaction that came from using their resources and stocking up for the year to come. "Memoirists of the day frequently expressed a sense that the house had been filled with the earth's bounty, top to bottom, end to end," writes Keith Stavely in *America's Founding Food* (UNC Press, 2003).

Preserving in the Colonies

Those Colonial homes filled from top to bottom could have contained a wide variety of foods, as early American cooks had many options for preserving food, including drying, smoking, salting, pickling, potting, confiting, cheese making, wine making, brewing and sugaring. An inventory of the recipes included in Martha Washington's *Booke of Cookery and Booke of Sweetmeats*, one of the most important historic cookbooks of its time, shows how important preserving was in feeding a family. According to Trudy Eden, author of *Early American Table* (NIU Press, 2008), the book's general cookery section of 205 recipes contains four recipes for making cheese; eight for pickled meats; 11 for pickled vegetables, berries and flowers; and one for keeping quinces for a year. The sweetmeats section, which contains 326 recipes, includes 100 for making fruit preserves, conserves, marmalades, jellies and quidonies (a thick syrup or jelly often made of quinces); 23 for fruit pastes and cakes; and 20 for flower and herb candies.

A New England kitchen scene during the Revolutionary War period.

While drying, pickling, salting, smoking and sugaring are still widespread methods of preserving foods today, potting is much less common. Modern potted meat has a mixed reputation, but in the Colonies, it was a popular way to keep food fresh to serve throughout the year. Various foods were potted, including meat (ham, beef, veal, tongue, game), poultry (chicken, turkey, swans), small birds (woodcocks, quail, larks), fish (char, tench, trout, eels), shellfish (lobster, crab, shrimp), mushrooms and cheese. "Generally, the meat or fish was cooked, boned, then pounded in a mortar with salt, pepper and a mixture of mace, nutmeg and cloves," says Patricia Reber, a hearth cooking demonstrator, teacher and owner of the Web site hearthcook.com. "The mixture was firmly pushed into a potting pot and sealed from the air with a layer of clarified butter. The pot was covered with paper or a bladder tied securely in place and stored in a cool dry location for months." (See sidebar for a recipe for potted swan.)

Colonial cooks also "regarded pie shells as storage containers," Eden says. "Some recipes for pie shells require coarse wheat or rye flours to make a tough crust. These crusts, called coffins, had removable lids. After the cook baked the pie, she removed the lid and poured melted butter over the filling to seal out the air. She put the lid back on and set the pie on a shelf for, some cookbooks said, a whole year. When she prepared the pie for a meal, she removed the lid, scraped off the butter, replaced the lid and heated the whole thing."

More Than a Long Shelf Life

For Colonial Americans, preserving food wasn't just about delaying its decay. Research shows that colonists also preserved foods in certain ways because they believed the processes were important for health reasons and it also added new flavors and variety to their diets.

"It would be hard to underestimate the importance placed on digestion in the early modern English world," Eden writes in "The Art of Preserving: How Cooks in Colonial Virginia Imitated Nature to Control It," an article in the journal *Eighteenth Century Life*. "It ranked foremost in matters of preventive and therapeutic health. Anglo-Americans believed that most illnesses arose in the digestive tract as a result of eating too much, eating the wrong foods, or eating the right foods improperly."

Those beliefs about digestion informed the colonists' practices of preserving food. Some preservation techniques, such as fermentation to produce wine, cheese, beer, bread and vinegar, imitated the natural process of digestion to refine foods. Other techniques, such as potting or making fruit preserves with sugar, "supplemented digestion by treating foods difficult to digest with easily assimilable, corruption-resistant substances," Eden writes.

In addition to mirroring or assisting digestion for better health, preservation techniques in early America were important for making food more enjoyable. "While extending the shelf lives of their foods, colonists' preserving techniques were also developed as cooking techniques to extend the variety of their foods," Eden adds. "Actually, I think their concept of good food was as complex as ours is today, just different."

While some accounts hint that early Americans used the spices and salt of the preservation process to

To Pot a Swan

From Eliza Smith's The Compleat Housewife: or, Accomplished Gentlewoman's Companion, *1739*

Bone and skin your Swan, and beat the flesh in a mortar, taking out the strings as you beat it; then take some clear fat bacon, and beat with the Swan, and when 'tis of a light flesh-colour, there is bacon enough in it; and when 'tis beaten till 'tis like dough, 'tis enough; then season it with pepper, salt, cloves, mace and nutmeg, all beaten fine; mix it well with your flesh, and give it a beat or two all together, then put it in an earthen pot, with a little claret and fair water, and at the top two pounds of fresh butter spread over it; cover it with coarse paste, and bake it with bread, then turn it out into a dish, squeeze it gently to get out the moisture; then put it in a pot fit for it; and when 'tis cold, cover it over with clarified butter, and next day paper it up. In this manner you may do Goose, Duck, or Beef, or Hare's flesh.

THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NEW YORK; ISTOCKPHOTO

Clockwise: Hanging a smoked ham; images from Colonial Williamsburg of nutmeg being grated, salt being washed from a ham and a Colonial feast served at Palace Kitchen.

COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION

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–Elizabeth Andress, Ph.D., director of the National Center for Home Food Preservation

cover up the taste of spoiled food, food historians say that just isn't true. According to Frank Clark, manager of the Historic Foodways Program at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Hanna Glass' *The Art of Cookery*, the best-selling cookbook of the time, devotes eight pages to instructing cooks on how to choose the freshest meat at market. "The freshness and safety of meat was of great concern," Clark says. "People of this period used spices in their food because they liked the taste of them, and they were somewhat costly, so using them made your food seem fancier and more high-class."

Preserving Food Today

Food preservation has changed significantly since Colonial days, especially with the introduction of modern canning techniques in the mid-1800s and home freezers in the 1950s. But after the rise of commercial food preservation in the 1960s, canned and frozen foods became readily available at the supermarket—and modern Americans largely lost interest in preserving foods at home.

"I cannot recall ever being asked for a pickle recipe in the 15 years I have worked in the kitchens at Colonial Williamsburg," Clark says. He does often hear people reminiscing about how their parents or grandparents "used to butcher their own hogs and make their own bacons and hams, or can their own vegetables," he says.

But change is coming. "We have begun to turn the corner on the mass industrialization and processing of our foods," Clark continues. "People are beginning to know what good cooks have always known, that local, fresh and natural foods taste better and are better for you than mass-produced and processed ones."

For instance, the highly spiced foods relished by American colonists are much less common today. "I think part of the [reason] is the mass production and marketing of foods," Clark says. "When you're selling to huge audiences, you don't want to put anything in there that might offend a potential customer, so foods got blander and blander."

Although home food preservation has skipped a generation or two, "I now hear anecdotally how more parents are wanting to [preserve their own foods] to teach some family heritage to their children," says Elizabeth Andress, Ph.D., University of Georgia nutrition professor and director of the National Center for Home Food Preservation. "They need help because they remember grandparents doing it, but their own parents didn't, so they weren't taught."

Last year, for instance, the University of Georgia sold more copies of its Cooperative Extension book, *So Easy to Preserve*, than in previous years, selling out twice during 2008. In one Georgia county, demand was so high for an annual introductory program about canning, freezing and drying foods that the extension agent repeated the program five times last year. Andress attributes the growing interest to economic concerns and food security issues, as distrust in imported foods has grown, as well as the local food movement.

For those new to home food preservation, Andress recommends starting with processes that offer fewer food safety risks. Freezing foods is less risky than canning, because "food stored at frozen temperatures is not going to be microbiologically unsafe, while food stored in closed containers at room temperatures could be if not processed properly first," she says. To get a more Colonial experience, beginners can try making jams and jellies, or properly pickled foods, which are also less risky from a food safety standpoint.

While Colonial Americans preserved their food out of necessity, those who do so today are motivated more by special food interests. The past two decades have seen varying interest in home preservation of salsas, mustards, barbecue sauces, tomato sauces and jams, according to Andress. "People now see home preserving in a more creative light than in the past, when it had more to do with needed food supply and subsistence," she says. "Preserving food at home is seen as a creative outlet and a heritage-related activity rather than as a necessity."

Nancy Mann Jackson's story on inauguration history appeared in the January/February 2009 issue of American Spirit.